

National Guard puts tank course plans on hold

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The Pennsylvania National Guard decided to delay for up to six months a decision on whether to carve a controversial tank training course out of 5,700 acres in northeast Clearfield County.

Guard spokesman Lt. Col. Chris Cleaver said the delay was partly an attempt to see if engineers can find answers to key issues — such as noise, dust and the potential for water pollution — that have raised local resistance.

Violet Shugerts, a spokeswoman for that resistance, charged yesterday the guard was delaying, hoping that opposition would fade. By Shugerts' estimate, 200 homes are within the training area on land the guard does not plan to buy.

The state has purchased 4,757 acres for \$4.37 million. Purchase agreements say that if the Guard wants to get out of the deal by May 31, the state would return the ground to sellers and pay them 5 percent of the purchase prices, or \$218,595. After May 31, the penalty doubles.

"They had no business making a deal like that in the first place," said Shugerts, a leader of the local Concerned Citizens for the Tank Training Facility.

The Guard, squeezed for space at its Fort Indiantown Gap headquarters in Lebanon and Dauphin counties, came to strip-mined northeast Clearfield seeking space for tank maneuvers that Cleaver said would include no live ammunition.

Cleaver said only a quarter of the property would be used for training. But the plan raised resentment among local residents who said property values would plummet. Resentment only grew when the Guard kept the proposal secret for more than two years, offering no specifics to local residents until it staged public forums last month.

During the past month, supervisors in Goshen and Girard townships, where the training center would be located, passed resolutions urging the Guard to stay out.

"We're going to look at concerns there now and see if they can be mitigated," Cleaver said.

Gannett Fleming Inc., an engineering firm the Guard hired to assess the environmental impact, suggested a closer look at the area, warning that the former strip mines there might have been used for hazardous materials and petroleum storage. The firm also suggested that the area be studied to see if shallow underground mining there poses a subsidence danger that could put heavy tanks at risk.